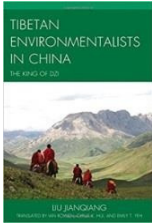


REVIEW: *TIBETAN ENVIRONMENTALISTS IN CHINA*

Reviewed by Bill Bleisch, PhD (China Exploration & Research Society)



Liu Jianqiang (Ian Rowen, Cyrus K Hui, and Emily T Yeh, translators) 2015. *Tibetan Environmentalists in China: The King of Dzi*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books. xxi + 327 pp, index. ISBN 978-0-7391-9973-2 (hardback 105USD) - ISBN 978-0-7391-9974-9 (electronic 103.35USD).

This translation is an edited and updated version of *Sky Beads - Tibetan Legends* ² by Chinese journalist Liu Jianqiang, an accomplished investigative reporter (Fowler and Dean 2006; Shapiro 2016:126). The author began work on the book in 2006 when he was a visiting scholar at Peking University. He subsequently conducted a series of lengthy in-depth interviews with several remarkable individuals from various regions of Tibet - Tashi Dorje Hashi (Tador); Rukai Karma Samdrup (Karma) and his older brother, Rinchen Samdrup (Rinchen); Tsewang Gendun Denba (Gendun), Musuo Lobsang Tsundru (Musuo), and others. What may have begun for the author as an investigation of local Tibetan environmental activism soon became something very different and more interesting: an exploration of the "remarkable lives" of individuals who had chosen to play a vibrant part in shaping the present and future of their home. The book explores not only their activities and thoughts on environmental and cultural conservation, but how these were shaped by their pasts and their current beliefs. The narrative digs unabashedly into all aspects of their lives, successes and mistakes, commitments and doubts. There is even an entire chapter devoted to the most intimate details of their complicated love lives, remarkable for the honesty and openness of the interviews.

Bleisch, Bill. 2018. Review: *Tibetan Environmentalists in China*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 51:351-359.

² *Tian zhu - zangren chuanqi* 天珠 - 藏人传奇.

While the main "protagonists" are all identified as environmentalists in the English title, it would be a mistake to consider them primarily as such. Most were involved with a broad range of endeavours: a monk, a painter, a musician, a spiritual adept, a businessman, a teacher, a party cadre. In fact, only one of them, Tador, dedicated himself full-time to addressing environmental protection. All share a dedication to grass-roots activism to promote Tibetan culture, environmental conservation, and rural development.

In the preface, the author provides an inside view of how he came to write this book, how he went about his research, and what his intentions were in its creation. The work grew out of a trip to Qinghai Province in July 2005 when the author was a reporter for the newspaper, *Southern Weekend*. This was when he first met Tador, the first Tibetan that he would come to know well, and his resolve to understand more about Tibetans grew out of this first meeting. As a visiting scholar at Peking University, he began conducting the detailed interviews for the book in an effort to record the real lives of several remarkable Tibetans. An appendix provides interview times and locations. Brief biographies are provided of the five "protagonists" and other prominent figures who appear in the book. This is followed by an introduction, which begins with a lively anecdote in which we first meet Karma during an almost comic incident of the loss and restoration of a fortune in antique *dzi* beads. This is also the reader's first introduction to different conceptions of fate and karma, a recurrent theme throughout the book.

Chapter One: Seeking Buddha, outlines the very different childhoods of Karma and Tador, using their stories to introduce some of the basic elements of Tibetan history and Tibetan Buddhism. Both lost their fathers when young and both were deeply affected by the historical changes swirling around them stirred by the Cultural Revolution, (1966-1976), which had profound impacts even in the most remote regions of the Tibetan plateau.

Despite prohibitions against religious practice during this time, Karma and his brother Rinchen were raised in the midst of their family's secret yet steadfast belief in Buddhism, particularly their devotion to Lama Changchub Dorje and later to his daughter, Ada Lhamo.

In contrast, Tador was raised by the village after his mother died. He received little exposure to Buddhism. He grew up as something of a wild child, but applied himself in school. It was there that he came to know a young teacher, Sonam Dargye, who would shape the rest of his life. The author skilfully ties the two stories together with his own by referencing the singular event of the death of Chairman Mao. At three PM Beijing time on September 18, 1976, Tador, Sonam, and the author, together with the entire nation, stood in widely distant spots in choreographed, simultaneous mourning.

In Chapter Two: Leaving Home, the reader learns more about Karma's formative years, his devotion to Buddhism and his decision to leave home and set out to make a fortune. "He would go to Lhasa, pray to Buddha and make big money" (64). Readers unfamiliar with Tibet may be introduced for the first time to certain Tibetan customs and beliefs, such as the carving of *mani* stones as an act of devotion, Dzogchen teachings, and polyandry, which was arranged by the family for Karma and his brother, Chime Namgyal. Rather than attempting to explain it in his own words, the author wisely chooses to introduce the strange and miraculous details of the life story of Dzogchen teacher, Changchub Dorje, with a long quotation from Lama Namkhai Norbu.

Chapter Three: Wasteland, abruptly picks up Tador's story again as he completes his education and returns to work first in Jyeku and then closer to his childhood home in Drido. He and his friends, Wangdrag, Tashi, and Gyaltsen, were the intellectuals of Drido at this time, and they quickly became active, forming the Awakening Society. The Society was soon closed down, but ten years later, Tador, Wangdrag, and Tashi would go on to establish the Upper Yangtze Organization, the first NGO for environmental protection on the Tibetan Plateau. Before long the four friends gave up their government jobs and became school teachers in order to try to introduce education reform, but when their efforts were stymied by the bureaucracy, they resigned their posts again.

Serendipitously, at that same moment, Sonam Dargye, by then a Deputy County Party Secretary, was looking for recruits for the Western Working Commission, an ad hoc government agency tasked with making plans for the remote western district of Suojia, an area of 50,000 square kilometres that included a vast no-man's land to the

west known as Kekexili. The Commission promptly discovered that outsiders were flocking into the region in a wild goldrush and began to resort to desperate measures to keep lawlessness out of Kekexili. By the mid-1990's, the poorly funded Commission also had to contend with a bloody massacre of Tibetan Antelope, as those hunting for fortune turned to another valuable resource of the region. Thus, it was that the Western Working Commission became an anti-poaching force, dedicated to the protection of the Tibetan Antelope. The subsequent history is well known, as the Commission, out-numbered and out-gunned, took on poachers in this remote wasteland, leading ultimately to the death of Sonam Dargye at the hands of poachers on January 18, 1994. Tador and the author provide unprecedented and harrowing details of that event.

The narrative then pauses, as Chapter Four: Love, provides an intimate window into the personal lives of the protagonists, detailing their often-complicated relationships with the opposite sex, which in three cases, flew in the face of tradition. Of particular interest are the accounts by two "fallen" monks, Rinchen and Gendun, both of whom left monastic life because of love. Karma and his wife-to-be also defied their families' traditions in order to marry.

Chapter Five: Seeking the Way, explores the deep conflict between the draw of spiritual life and the imperative the protagonists feel to take action to protect Tibetan heritage. This conflict is explored deeply through the story of Musuo and the other members of the Khawakarpo Cultural Society. Founded by Sonam Norbu, Tseli Nyima (Xiaoma) and colleagues to promote Tibetan language and culture, the Society only later came to environmental activism through its efforts to protect the ancient cypress trees on the slopes of the sacred mountain Khawakarpo in northwest Yunnan. It was Xiaoma who convinced Musuo, a musician and composer turned spiritual seeker, to return to secular life and join the Society:

Your hiding alone in the mountains to meditate is only for yourself; if you come out, you'll be serving all of us...The ethnic culture of Deqin is at the crossroads of life and death. You've got to take responsibility for the survival of our ethnic culture (189-190).

The chapter highlights the tension between Buddhist practise and activism in the secular world through Musuo's thoughts and struggles.

Chapter Six: *Running Away*, raises the tension by picking up Tador's story again after the death of Sonam Dorgye. Under suspicion, first by the police, and then by the community, Tador nearly succumbed to despair, but eventually recovered and returned to work, first as head of the county Information Bureau where he popularized Sonam Dargye's accomplishments. He continued as a member of the informal Beard Gang with Wangdrag and Tashi, dedicated to fulfilling Sonam Dargye's unfulfilled dreams of development for Suojia, with or without government support. It was at this time that the idea of an integrated ecological and economic zone along the headwaters of the Yangtze crystalized in Tador's mind. It was the subject of his graduation thesis at a (Communist) Party School in 1998, and then became the mission of the Upper Yangtze Organization, an organization started by three Tibetan cadres, and the first Tibetan environmental NGO to be recognized in China. Grassroots nature conservation was to be the core of their program for community development. As Tador summarizes it:

The government's method of protection is to establish bureaus and send police to relocate the people. Our wish is to establish nature reserves inside Tibetan areas, to let Tibetans and not police protect the environment (228).

In Chapter Seven: *Homecoming*, the author returns to Karma's story, covering the wild ride of his life as he rises and falls and rises again in business. By the summer of 1993, he was specializing in the buying and selling of antiques, and soon became successful and well-known as the "King of Dzi" after he famously cornered the world market in *dzi*, the valuable Tibetan sky beads of that name. Through his business as an antique dealer, Karma developed a passion for protecting culture. It is at this point in the book that Karma narrates more set-backs in his own words with the problematic "Xinjiang story" of 1998. The chapter then moves on to bring four of the protagonists together, as Karma enlists Tador to run the Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association, based in Yushu. They work jointly to support Karma's

brothers, Rinchen and Chime Namgyal, in protecting sacred mountains and holy lakes. In the remainder of the chapter and in Epilogue: Return to Lhasa, the views of all of the five protagonists on development, civilization and religion are revisited and probed deeply. The epilogue ends with the author musing nostalgically, regretting the modernization of Lhasa and the changes that are again swirling through Tibet, this time stirred by commercialization.

Perhaps some of the most moving and thought-provoking ideas in the book are expressed here, in a long quote from Tador about how he sees his role and the future. His mission is clear:

My job is to tell the indigenous people that they are the principals of this land. ... I do not advocate conflict between indigenous people against outsiders.... There's no need for antagonism. That would only result in tragedy (295).

But Tador does not hide his misgivings:

Now I've got lots of doubts about what I've accomplished in these years. How many have listened to me? What policy changes have I affected?... I ... wish I had unshakable faith like Karma and Rinchen [to] give me strength (298).

Tador, like his teacher and mentor Sonam Dargye, had little exposure to Buddhism when young, and his relationship with it is ambivalent even when it grows stronger later in his life. In contrast, the profound relationship that the other protagonists have with Buddhism motivates and directs their activities. And yet they also question and doubt the relationship between their religion and their activism. Karma notes "I came to realize that the protection of monasteries and Buddha statues alone cannot protect Tibetan culture" (293). At the same time, Buddhism challenges the relevance of conservation. Musuo quotes the adept Chime Dorje (Zhonghua) "Total dedication to the protection of culture carries little significance because sooner or later it'll disappear" (204). Musuo's involvement with protection and promotion of Tibetan culture was thus also ambivalent. As one of the most active members of the Khawakarpo

Cultural Preservation Society, he was deeply involved with their efforts to promote Tibetan culture and protect the environment in the region of Deqin in northwest Yunnan. Yet he wrestles with conflicts between his Buddhist studies and his secular life.

Similar struggles appear in the shorter sections covering the lives and activities of Rinchen and Gendun, both of whom were formerly ordained as monks, but returned to lay life because of love relationships. Their stories are intertwined with that of Karma's, who is by far the most complex and contradictory figure of the five. After his success in business, Karma became interested in Tibetan cultural artefacts and art and amassed an important collection with which he started a museum in Lhasa:

In my life, protection of culture is most important. Whether it is Chinese, Tibetan, Zhang Zhun or Persian, I want to protect it all. Everyone's enjoyment is different. What I enjoy most is the protection of culture (303-304).

Karma only later became interested in environmental conservation, and began actively supporting Tador, his brothers Rinchen and Chime Namgyal, and others in their efforts. What set Karma apart was his unshakable optimism and faith, which carried him through repeated set-backs and failures, including arrest and imprisonment. This faith may have been at the heart of Karma's resilience, as Tador points out:

The major difference between Karma, Rinchen and me is their faith and my lack of it.... I attended school and I'm a cadre who left my homeland. We who have attended school have lots of problems: small-minded cleverness, selfishness, too much concern for our own affairs, over-cautiousness and frustration. Karma isn't like that at all. He is characteristic of the working class: full of sincerity and generosity, happy whether the sky collapses on him or not, and relentless in pursuit of his goals, and accepting all setbacks (298).

Sadly, we learn in the postscript, written for this English language edition in December 2014 after the author took up a position as a visiting scholar at the University of California Berkeley, that

Karma was again imprisoned after the publication of the Chinese edition of this book, and sentenced to fifteen years in jail for crimes for which he had already been exonerated in a previous trial.

Throughout the book, we are constantly reminded that this is an exploration of Tibet and the various experiences of modern Tibetans written by an acknowledged outsider. It is written with a passion for accuracy and detail, and, as such, the Chinese edition would have been helpful in stripping away the imaginings of Tibet that befuddle most people's views inside China, providing them with a glimpse of a world far removed from the romanticized and demonized visions of Tibetans that thread through contemporary Chinese pop culture.

For most people, Tibet is only the Tibet of the imagination. The lives of the six million Tibetans have been neglected. Without seeing their faces or listening to their voices, there is no understanding of their real lives... I wanted to know the past of these people ... and, even more, I wanted to know how they create her present and her future (x).

With increasing insight, the author clearly succeeded; but he still cannot help but bring his own biases and imaginings to his writing. Inevitably, the book is often a personal exploration of the experiences of an outsider interacting with Tibetans in Tibet. It is most valuable and enlightening when the author backs away and lets his protagonists speak in their own words. While the author himself achieved a higher degree of understanding, it is not clear how successful this book has been in introducing Chinese readers to a different view of modern Tibetans. The Chinese edition was published only in Hong Kong and is not widely available in mainland China. The English edition will reach an even smaller audience there.

The author's motivations in writing this book were clear from the outset and are clearly stated in the preface: "I decided to write a book to record these remarkable lives and explore their souls, and perhaps, through them, explore my own soul" (x). Clearly, this personal journey was as important to the author as any expected impact the book might have had on understanding environmental protection or on perceptions of Tibetans by outsiders: "I may be a Han

Chinese, but what I was doing here in Tibet was no different than my local friends. I was finding my faith before seeking my future" (xxi).

In this deeply personal search, we can hope the author was successful, but at what cost? At the end, we are left with a haunting and complex image. Standing before the image of the Shakyamuni Buddha in the Jokhang Temple, the most sacred spot in all of Tibet, the author, with germinating faith, prays for greater personal wisdom. Tador, the doubter and sceptic, stands beside him. Yet he too prays, also in tears, first for others, and only then for himself, for the personal strength to carry on.

Buddha, I pray for you to protect all lives on the Tibetan plateau, allowing them to coexist in harmony (299).

REFERENCES

- Fowler, Geoffrey A., and Jason Dean. 2006. Paper Chase: China's Reporters Face a Backlash over Investigations. *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, A1.
- Shapiro, Judith. 2016. *China's Environmental Challenges*. 2nd edition. Malden, MA: Polity Press.